

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01
INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02
SS-15 USIA-06 ACDA-07 /075 W
-----231252Z 051068 /47

R 220845Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY VALLETTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7286
INFO AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY MADRID
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
AMEMBASSY TUNIS
USMISSION NATO
EC BRUSSELS

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, MT
SUBJECT: TROOPING THE COLOR; BRITISH MILITARY WITHDRAWAL
FROM MALTA BEGINS

1. CLIMAXING A SPECIAL VISIT HERE FOR THE OCCASION BY
ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET THE EARL MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA, THE
CEREMONIAL START OF THE BRITISH MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM
MALTA TOOK PLACE ON MARCH 16. AT A HIGHLY IMPRESSIVE
OFFICIAL CEREMONY, SOME 365 OFFICERS AND MEN OF THE 41ST
COMMANDO GROUP OF THE ROYAL MARINES "TROOPED THE COLOR"
BEFORE A LARGE AUDIENCE OF LOCAL DIGNITARIES AND RESIDENTS,
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INCLUDING SEVERAL THOUSAND MALTESE SPECTATORS. FOLLOWING
AN 19-GUN SALUTE FOR LORD MOUNTBATTEN, WHO IS COLONEL
COMMANDANT OF THE ROYAL MARINE CORPS, THE 41ST COMMANDOS
MARCHED PAST IN BOTH SLOW AND QUICK TIME. THE PARADE WAS
CONCLUDED BY A DRIVE-PAST OF THE UNIT'S HOWITZERS AND A
FLY-OVER OF THEIR HELICOPTERS.

2. PRESENT AT THE CEREMONY WERE DR. DANIEL PISCOPO, MINISTER OF TOURISM, REPRESENTING THE GOVERNMENT OF MALTA; BRIGADIER ARTHUR GERA, COMMANDER OF THE ARMED FORCES OF MALTA; DR. GIORGIO BORG OLIVIER, LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION NATIONALIST PARTY; SIR ANTHONY MAMO, RETIRED RESIDENT OF MALTA; THE RESIDENT DIPLOMATIC CORPS, AND OTHER LOCAL DIGNITARIES. ALSO PRESENT WERE LIEUTENANT GENERAL J.C. RICHARDS, COMMANDANT GENERAL OF THE ROYAL MARINES, AND REAR ADMIRAL O.N.A. CECIL, COMMANDER BRITISH FORCES, MALTA.

3. IT WAS ANNOUNCED THAT THIS CEREMONY MARKED THE BEGINNING OF THE CLOSING PHASE OF AN ERA OF ANGLO-MALTESE HISTORY WHICH HAD BEGUN IN 1798, WHEN A BRITISH MARINE OFFICER RAISED THE UNION JACK FOR THE FIRST TIME ON MALTESE SOIL. THIS BRITISH FORCE, WHICH HAD COME TO MALTA AT THE REQUEST OF THE MALTESE WHO HAD REBELLED AGAINST NAPOLEON'S OCCUPATION TROOPS, LATER SET UP THE FIRST MALTESE MILITARY UNITS, WHICH EVENTUALLY BECAME THE FORERUNNERS OF TODAY'S ARMED FORCES OF MALTA.

4. THIS TROOPING OF THE COLOR WAS, IN EFFECT, THE FAREWELL PARADE FOR ALL OF THE BRITISH MILITARY PERSONNEL STILL STATIONED IN MALTA. THE ROYAL MARINES WILL BEGIN THEIR ACTUAL WITHDRAWAL FROM MALTA LATER THIS MONTH, TO BE FOLLOWED BY THE OTHER BRITISH ARMY, NAVY AND AIR FORCE UNITS OVER THE TWO-YEAR PERIOD WHICH COMES TO AN OFFICIAL END ON MARCH 31, 1979, WHEN THE MALTESE/BRITISH MILITARY FACILITIES AGREEMENT EXPIRES. THIS WAS THE ONLY PUBLIC CEREMONY THAT THE BRITISH FORCES PLAN TO HOLD IN CONJUNCTION LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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WITH THEIR DEPARTURE FROM MALTA, SO IT THEREFORE REPRESENTED THEIR SYMBOLIC "FAREWELL" TO THE MALTESE AFTER AN HISTORIC, IF SOMETIMES TURBULENT ASSOCIATION.

5. COMMENT: THE MALTESE OBSERVED WHAT LORD MOUNTBATTEN CALLED "THIS GREAT OCCASION (REPRESENTING) THE FINEST EXAMPLE OF BRITISH MILITARY CEREMONIAL" WITH MIXED EMOTIONS. FOR SOME, IT MARKED THE FAST-APPROACHING CULMINATION OF A LONG STRUGGLE TO BE INDEPENDENT AND "FREE" FROM A RESIDENT BRITISH MILITARY PRESENCE. FOR OTHERS, IT ONLY HIGHLIGHTED THEIR GROWING UNEASE ABOUT MALTA'S POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SECURITY AFTER THE BRITISH HAVE LEFT. BUT FOR ALL, THIS COLORFUL SPECTACLE BROUGHT HOME VIVIDLY THE FACT THAT THE BRITISH, INDEED, ARE LEAVING MALTA AFTER BEING HERE FOR ALMOST 180 YEARS. AND IF, IN PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF'S PHRASE, "AFTER 1979, THE FUTURE BECKONS", MANY MALTESE ARE WONDERING JUST WHAT THAT FUTURE WILL BE LIKE AFTER THE "REDCOATS" HAVE GONE. LAINGEN

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: REPORTS, MILITARY CEREMONIES, TROOP REDUCTIONS, DEMOBILIZATION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 22-Mar-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977VALLET00322
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770099-0595
Format: TEL
From: VALLETTA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770333/aaaabcpl.tel
Line Count: 115
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 5eb1aab3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 16-Nov-2004 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3030260
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: TROOPING THE COLOR; BRITISH MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM MALTA BEGINS
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, MT, UK
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/5eb1aab3-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009